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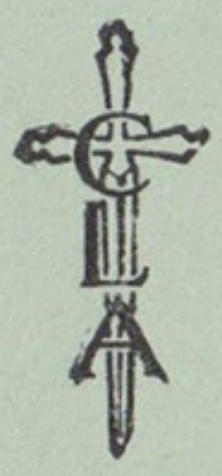
HOLY WEEK

by

Harold Riley



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The Origin of Holy Week

THE last week of Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday and ending on Holy Saturday, is known as Holy Week. Although the celebration of Easter is as old as Christianity, the observance of Holy Week (including that of Good Friday) began considerably later. It was first kept in the city where we should expect a special interest in the sacred sites and events of the Passion, in Jerusalem. By the year A.D. 385, when the lady Etheria went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it had already been established, and visits were paid to the sites of the Passion, and services held there. Dom Gregory Dix (in " The Shape of the Liturgy ") has suggested that the organizer of the observance was St. Cyril, the Bishop of Jerusalem, in which case Etheria took part in the rites very soon after their inception.

Devotion in Holy Week

No time in the year makes so great an appeal to the devout Christian as this week. In it we recall the events that are most moving in themselves, and of immense significance for our lives: the stages of the Passion, the institution of the holy Eucharist, the Crucifixion and the burial of our Saviour. There are popular devotions, such as that of the Stations of the Cross, or the Three Hours' Devotion on Good Friday, which have arisen to help Christians in their thoughts on the sacred events; but we shall here confine our attention to the liturgical services of this week. They should indeed be the staple of our devotion; they not only remind us of the historical happenings, but also help us to enter into their meaning, as no other services can.

Palm Sunday

The Palm Sunday rite falls into two parts, the first in celebration of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem, the second the Mass in honour of his Passion. The Palm

ceremonies themselves follow the structure of the Mass fairly closely. They begin with the singing of the *Anthem* the people used at Jerusalem (St. Matt. xxi. 9), " Hosanna to the Son of David," corresponding to the Introit at Mass; a *Collect* is then sung; after which a *Lesson* (Exod. xv. 27–xvi. 7) gives an account of the wanderings of the Israelites which foreshadows the events of this week. The people came to the palm-trees of Elim; they were promised the " bread from heaven "; at even they would know that they were delivered; in the morning they would see God's glory. So we begin this week with our palm-boughs; the eucharistic " Bread from heaven " was given on Maundy Thursday; on Good Friday our Lord died to redeem us; " in the morning " of Easter Day we saw his glory.

After a chant has been sung, the *Gospel* (St. Matt. xxi. 1–9) relates the story of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem; in meekness the King enters the holy city, riding on an ass, to the welcome of the multitude, and with the air full of waving palm-branches. A prayer then follows, with a Preface and the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*; the latter being the hymn that the Church has adopted from the people's welcome to our Lord on this very day. Prayers for the *Blessing of the Palms* are then said, after which the Palms are distributed. This having been done, a *Procession* is formed, going into the open air, and then entering the Church, as Christ entered the holy city. Before entering, however, those within and without the Church sing the hymn best known in the translation, " All glory, laud and honour to thee, Redeemer, King." So the Procession returns, and the Mass begins.

The *Introit* (or Entrance-chant) is from Psalm 22 (" My God, my God, look upon me "), which is pre-eminently the Psalm of the Passion, and words from which were among the last words of our Lord on the Cross. In the *Collect*, remembering our Lord's death, we pray that we may follow him in his patience, and

share in his Resurrection. We pray to be of the same mind as he was, and this also supplies the theme of the *Epistle* (Phil. ii. 5–11), in which St. Paul teaches us to imitate Christ's humility, shown " even unto the death of the Cross ". Through it, he says, Christ has been exalted above all, that at his name " every knee should bow ", as indeed the people do kneel when these words are read.

The chants after the Epistle are a *Gradual* from Psalm 73, and a *Tract* from Psalm 22. These are followed by the *Passion* from St. Matthew. When the narratives of the Passion are solemnly sung in Holy Week, three " deacons of the Passion " sing different parts. One (whose part is marked in the books as " Chronista ") sings the actual narrative; another (" Synagoga ") the speeches of all except our Lord; a third (Christus ") the words of our Saviour; the words of the crowd may be sung by the choir. The " Christus " part is sometimes marked in the text by a small cross, instead of an initial. When the death of our Lord is related (at the words " yielded up the ghost ") all kneel in reverence for their Saviour's death. The end of the Passion is treated as the ordinary Gospel, and incense is carried in the usual way. On Palm Sunday, the Palms are held during the Passion and Gospel, but not during the rest of the Mass.

The next three days of Holy Week do not call for special comment as regards their structure; the Masses provided for them are full of teaching, and deserve careful study.

Maundy Thursday

On Maundy Thursday we begin the " Triduum Sanctum "—the " Holy Three Days ". The Epistle is from I Cor. xi., and gives St. Paul's " tradition " of the institution of the Holy Eucharist. What he " delivered " (his " tradition ") he had himself received, how that Christ took bread and blessed and broke it, and blessed the cup " when he had supped ".

This is the day of the institution of this Blessed Sacrament, in honour of which the altar is decorated as on a feast, with white hangings. It is also the day of our Lord's being betrayed, and the remembrance of this overshadows our rejoicings.

At the end of the Mass, the Blessed Sacrament is taken in procession to the *Altar of Repose*. A host has been specially consecrated, and will be used in the Good Friday rite, and is now carried to the special place prepared, while the hymn of the Blessed Sacrament ("Sing, my tongue, the mystery telling", English Hymnal 326) is sung. Here it provides the focus of our devotion until the next morning; and, as our Lord asked his Apostles, "Could ye not watch with me one hour," so a watch is kept through the day and night, with people praying in the presence of Christ. Many candles are kept burning, and flowers decorate the altar, in honour of him who was alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. Apart from this one altar, all the altars are stripped and left bare, as the Church enters her time of mourning.

Good Friday

The Good Friday rite consists of several different parts. The first follows the usual general structure of the Mass, though it begins with a *Lesson* from Hosea (vi. 1–6) instead of the customary Introit. The *Passion* is that of St. John, treated as on the other days in Holy Week.

After this, solemn *Collects* follow, in intercession for the needs of all men. To-day Christ died for all, and our prayers are offered with a corresponding generosity of charity.

The *Veneration of the Cross* then takes place. A Cross is unveiled, while there is sung "Behold the wood of the Cross, whereon was hung the world's salvation"; after which, to the moving strains of the *Reproaches*, all come to the Cross to venerate the price of their redemption. The Reproaches are based

on Scriptural texts, and merge into the singing of the hymn "Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle" (English Hymnal 95 and 96).

When the Veneration is over, the Blessed Sacrament is brought in procession to the Altar for the *Mass of the Pre-sanctified*, that is for the communion of the celebrant from the Blessed Sacrament consecrated on the previous day, according to ancient custom.

Holy Saturday

Holy Saturday was the chief day for Baptisms in the primitive Church. The rite is the longest of the year. First comes the blessing of the *New Fire*, from which the *Paschal Candle* is lighted; then, in the Sanctuary, it is blessed with an ancient chant (the "Exsultet"). Five grains of incense, set in the side of the candle, remind us of the wounds in Christ's risen Body.

The thought of Baptism is then brought much closer to us, since at this point the candidates were catechized and prepared. A series of Prophecies were therefore read, after each of them prayer being offered. The Prophecies were originally from the instruction of those to be baptized, but all can with profit learn from the messages that they contain.

The candidates being prepared, the ancient custom then provides for the *Blessing of the Font*. A long prayer is introduced by the Sursum Corda ("Lift up your hearts"); it goes on to recall the use God has made of water in different parts of his revelation, and asks for the divine blessing on all to be baptized.

A *Litany* follows, as a solemn act of supplication. It supplies the transition between the rites of Holy Week and the *first Mass of Easter* in which our rejoicings for the Resurrection begin.

Tenebrae

Apart from the Mass, we may notice the special ceremonies that have been associated with Matins for

the last three days of Holy Week. The office is usually sung by anticipation on the previous evenings, and through the custom of gradually extinguishing the candles on a special stand (called a " hearse "—the same word as " harrow " since this also has spikes similar to those sometimes used to hold candles), the service has become known as " Tenebrae ", the Latin word for " darkness ". The betrayal of our Lord, his death, and his burial, supply the special subjects of our devotion for the three evenings.

The Mind of the Church

Our sketch of Holy Week services is necessarily brief and inadequate. It is only intended as a guide to those who wish to see what the structure of them is. Those who try at this season to enter into the mind of the Church, and to meditate on the words of Holy Writ, will see many beauties in the Church's devotion, and learn many lessons about the meaning of the sacred Passion. Before their eyes the drama of redemption will be acted out; it will only become fruitful in their lives if they strive themselves to be united to Christ in his death and Resurrection by " a death to sin and a new life unto righteousness ". So they will fulfil the promise of their Baptism, " to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and to be like unto him "; and having learned to " follow the example of his great humility ", will be made, in this life and in the life to come, " partakers of his Resurrection ". To enter into the understanding of the Passion is to face the realities of existence, and to prepare oneself for those blessings that have been granted us through the triumph of him whose members we are.

O Saviour of the world, who by thy Cross and precious Blood hast redeemed us,
Save us and help us, we humbly beseech thee, O Lord.

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